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NEW BOOKS REVIEWED.

BY OLIVIA HOWARD DUNBAR, F. TABER COOPER, CLAYTON HAMILTON
AND LOUISE COLLIER WILLCOX.

“CHARLES DICKENS: A CRITICAL STUDY.”*

READERS of his briefer essays might easily suppose this book to be merely a renewed invitation to watch the sparks fly from Mr. Chesterton's metallic intelligence. It is considerably more than that. At the same time, it is more characteristically frolicsome, less restrained and direct, than the same author's study of Browning. Yet the discussion of Dickens has plainly been a more congenial exercise, because the general view (and it is the general view that Mr. Chesterton has always in mind: he is not addressing students) regards Browning more consistently than it regards Dickens, and is, therefore, less amenable to critical horseplay. The book almost presents itself in the form of a pantomimic dialogue between Mr. Chesterton and the Public—both agreeing at the start that Dickens is “great,” but that certain apologies are to be made for him. “But,” the Critic challenges his Public with a hearty laugh and a loud bang on the table, “you don't know, after all, why Dickens is great, and the things you apologize for are the wrong things.” As the Public opens its eyes and drops its jaw, the merry and muscular critic trips its feet, deftly punches its body, blindfolds it, plays tricks on it from behind. At the end, it is so befuddled that it is willing to concede that Dickens's greatness is of any order Mr. Chesterton suggests. A critic who gives this impression of robust tirelessness has, perhaps, the same advantage as the disputant with the loudest voice in a general discussion. Might prevails.

* “Charles Dickens: A Critical Study.” By G. K. Chesterton. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company.

After this first superficial impression, it is at once discoverable that the book has that paramount essential, a profoundly sympathetic understanding. That is to say, if a more conventional critic had written it, we should probably call it an "appreciation." This is all the more important because the subjects with which Mr. Chesterton is thus fortunately equipped to deal are, it may be inferred from his essays, few. His value as a general touchstone and interpreter is, at most, disputable. But his understanding of Dickens is real enough to be reckoned as a talent. He understands even better than he is always willing to admit, for certain of his apologies are insincere, certain of his extenuations unnecessary. He is literally hampered by his tumultuous impatience with cut-and-dried criticism, with the tribe of "literary" critics; for his reaction results in the most unnecessary emphasis, the most violent generalities. If you see faults in Dickens, it is because there is a mote in your own eye, he maintains—and frequently contradicts himself afterward. "There is plenty to carp at in this man if you are inclined to carp; you may easily find him vulgar if you cannot see that he is divine." He is so jealous of his hero's supremacy that he has not always the heart quite to tell the truth about him.

For the really original contributions that Mr. Chesterton has made to the tremendously interesting subject he has chosen, it is necessary to look beneath the broad divisions of his work. His opening chapter on "The Dickens Period" is a labored and foggy effort to relate Dickens to his age. Such a chapter as that "On the Alleged Optimism of Dickens" is a kind of thicket where you may now and then encounter a savory and pungent bush. There is one considerable section, however, wherein, with highly successful adroitness as well as sound critical sense, the author insists on the folly of criticising Charles Dickens's novels as "unreal." The Dickens world, like the Homeric, is superhuman; its characters live long before the beginning of the story and long beyond the end of it, and the interest and awe that they excite are very different from the start of bored recognition which we give the offensively real little characters about whom people nowadays write short stories. "Dickens did not strictly make a literature" is Mr. Chesterton's penetrating summary; "he made a mythology." "He did not always manage to make his characters men, but he managed at the least to make

them gods." "Mr. Pickwick," it is delightfully urged, "was a fairy." Undoubtedly this is Mr. Chesterton's sanest and subtlest point. It gives his book a flavor of permanence.

Otherwise, the value of the book abides to a great degree in certain trenchant sentences. These condensed observations are less often literally true than they are, in our modern cant, "suggestive"; but to the literal-minded Mr. Chesterton could never be more than an irritation. It inclines one indulgently toward the critic's sins to read that "Dickens had to make a character humorous before he could make it human"; or that "The children of his fancy are spoilt children. . . . They smash the story to pieces like so much furniture"; or that the great novelist "had all his life the faults of the little boy who is kept up too late at night. . . . Dickens was always a little too irritable because he was a little too happy." It is also observed with great truth that Dickens never travelled out of England, that his journeys were rather made in "Dickensland." And there are some delicious pages setting forth a fact dear to Mr. Chesterton's sense of paradox—namely, that Dickens chose the time when he was in Italy to write tales "full of fog and snow and hail and happiness." "In the sunlight of the southern world . . . he dreamed a lovely dream of chimney-pots." "Amid the white cities of Tuscany, he hungered for something romantic and wrote about a rainy Christmas."

The quality of such observations as these is quite distinct from that of the multitude of arbitrarily balanced sentences, tumbling precipitately away from their unnaturally conspicuous semicolons, with which Mr. Chesterton chooses to arrest attention and deform his style. None of his critical antagonists can suffer as severely from his rough-and-tumble methods as his own phrases do. His sentences are too often like trained animals, forced into difficult but meaningless attitudes which nature never intended sentences to assume, and which it seems scarcely kind to contemplate. The only value of such sentences as, "It was not the aim of Dickens to show the effect of time and circumstance upon a character; it was not even his aim to show the effect of a character on time and circumstance," is to illustrate the extent to which a rhetorical vice may develop. Similarly cumbrous of the text, and obscuring of its genuine criticism, are those frequent passages where Mr. Chesterton employs his amazing ver-

bal necromancy to maintain points that could appeal only to an insatiable sense of absurdity. He has so mastered a certain illegitimate dexterity that it is just as easy for him to prove a thing as to assert it—and a good deal more bewildering. His prose, therefore, has often something of the nightmare humor of a limerick. If you are not too much irritated by its preposterous implications, you will find yourself applauding its ingenuity. He is easily able to prove, for instance, that the English, in their strong liking for comfort and in their effort to secure it, are “suffering for an idea”; that this longing is spiritual and poetic, and that the Briton’s “surliness is at root romantic.” But Mr. Chesterton makes no more pretence of a cosmopolitan breadth of vision than he attributes to Dickens himself. He sounds the loud jingo note of English preeminence, political, social and literary; and, by way of apologizing for Martin Chuzzlewit, refers to the “coarse, rank refinement” that Dickens encountered in America. It is his fairly thoroughgoing comment that “America will always affect an Englishman as being soft in the wrong place and hard in the wrong place; coarse exactly where all civilized men are delicate, delicate exactly where all grown-up men are coarse.”

An admirable sense of proportion, prominent among Mr. Chesterton’s virtues, has compelled a light and discreet handling of the biographical material, a subordination of that human story that has always so strong a tendency to spread and stifle criticism. He has not the tedious and squalid conscientiousness of less vigorous and less muscular minds. He does not ask us to pry in irrelevant corners or to split historical hairs. And, of course, it matters very little that all this may be in Mr. Chesterton as much a necessity as a virtue. He is blithely equal to the skilful suppression entailed by a summary or a survey when it is possible that his restless temper would resent the demands of an elaborate biography. There is a cheerful breeziness and an air of being in a legitimate hurry in Mr. Chesterton’s most serious critical utterances. Far from smelling of the lamp, at least the library lamp, they distinctly reflect the glare of the electric bulb, if they do not actually echo the sound of the presses; and suggest being written late at night in a newspaper office, rather than at a quiet desk in the sane and sober interval preceding luncheon. It must surely have been under some such stimu-

lating conditions, and with perhaps the added aid of coffee and cigars, that he conceived this description of Dickens's personal appearance: "His face had a peculiar tint or quality, . . . a sort of pale glitter and animation, very much alive and yet with something deathly about it, like a corpse galvanized by a god. . . . Brown of hair and beard, . . . he had . . . eyes that were always darting about like brilliant birds."

A writer employing the meditative and scholarly, rather than the recklessly impressionistic, method, might in the end arrive at Mr. Chesterton's own conclusion—that Dickens is the greatest of nineteenth-century novelists, the most stupendous imaginative force of his age. In which assumption, it seems possible that Dickens has only just begun to be written about, that future critics will neglect him far less frankly. Meanwhile, such a book as Mr. Chesterton's will help much in precipitating a sane estimate of the man on whom not idolatry, nor contempt, nor the profitless habit of contrasting him with Thackeray, has shed an adequately interpretative light.

OLIVIA HOWARD DUNBAR.

"THE SANDS OF PLEASURE."*

THE right to deal in fiction with the more unsavory facts of life, like the license to compound or administer powerful remedies, is one which the weight of public opinion concedes most cautiously, and only to such novelists as vindicate themselves by their method of using such material. No amount of specious argument will help a book that ventures to probe the plague-spots of our social structure, unless the book contains within itself its own ample justification. It must be the product of assured knowledge and worthy motive; its mood must not be hysterical, or brutal or gloating; but, like a skilful surgeon, it must do the probing with sympathetic understanding and unflinching purpose. And because a writer who combines these qualities is rare, when occasionally such a book as Mr. Filson Young's "Sands of Pleasure" is unobtrusively put forth, it is not only a duty but a privilege to give it the fearless and cordial recognition which its purpose and its workmanship deserve.

* "The Sands of Pleasure." By Filson Young. Boston: Dana, Estes & Co.